

JUST THE RIGHT ANGLE
A One Act Play of the Old West
By Sam Miller

The Setting:

A small town in the state of Texas, near the border with Mexico. The early 1870s, the Civil War a fresh memory and Reconstruction still ongoing.

The Players:

Stephen Angler, an African American sharpshooter and cowboy. A veteran of war and an avid mathematician, a cool-headed quick thinker. His enemies call him "Ol' Geometry."

Methuselah Humberfold, a tower of a man made even taller on his jet black horse. A Texas Ranger with a permanent scowl and a pale wide-eyed face, who wants to get rid of Ol' Geometry for good.

Maria Espinoza, the owner of the local saloon. Exuberant and optimistic. She tries to stay neutral in conflicts; it's better for business that way.

Pablo Mendoza, a jovial local farmer and friend of Stephen's.

Jefferson Oakfield, a local banker and chess player who frequents Maria's saloon. Friendly rivalry with Stephen Angler, very selfish.

Ofelia Alvarez, the fancy daughter of a prominent local landlord, who comes onto the scene curious as to why a Texas Ranger has come on by.

Their Game:

Lights up. Inside the saloon of Maria Espinoza. Maria stands behind a counter, cleaning/preparing glasses. The place is empty except for Stephen Angler and Jefferson Oakfield playing a game of billiards off to the side.

JEFFERSON

Gettin' a lil sweaty now aren't we, Mr. Angler? Startin' to get a bit worked up?

STEPHEN

Me? Worked up? Hah! Nothing of the sort, my friend.

JEFFERSON

I'm certain of it! In fact, I can see the sweat on your forehead right now sir!

STEPHEN

(Pulls out a sweat rag from his pocket and wipes his forehead.) Only the fine Texas heat. *(He wrings out the sweat rag into a bucket next to his seat.)* Let me take my shot. *(He leans down close to the pool table, moving his cue to different positions to check different angles before hitting it into the hole.)* Your turn.

JEFFERSON

(Muttering under his breath as he steps back and surveys the game.) God above, Ol' Geometry, how do you do it?

STEPHEN

It's all in the angles, my friend. If I had struck that ball at even just a degree or two off, and had not used the precise amount of force, it shan't have rolled so nicely into the hole. Simple geometry, really!

JEFFERSON

You have got to teach me some of these... techniques some day.

STEPHEN

I just might! Now get back to it. *(Gestures to the pool table with his open hands.)*

The game is interrupted by Pablo Mendoza bursting into the saloon from offstage. He looks frantic.

PABLO

Stephen, Stephen, you gotta get outta here!

STEPHEN

Jeeze oh freakin' Pete, Pablo, calm down! What's goin' on?

PABLO

Th-there's a Texas Ranger here! Methuselah!

STEPHEN

Methuselah? As in, Methuselah Humberfold? *(Pablo nods.)* Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!

MARIA

Who in the hell are you two talkin' about?

STEPHEN

Only the worst tyrant and most dark hearted man south of the Red River, señora! A man out for my head! *(Turning to Jefferson)* Looks like our little game is gonna have to wait.

JEFFERSON

Sure, Geometry, cower in the corner like you always do when you face off with me! The greatest pool shark this side of the Mississippi!

STEPHEN

No... Gadzooks Jeffy, you really are a piece of work. Pablo, where can I go?

PABLO

He's here right now! I saw him on his great black horse, looming like Pestilence!

STEPHEN

Zounds! Lady Maria, hide me!

MARIA

Here, behind the side of the counter! It ain't visible from the door.

STEPHEN

Miss Espinoza, you are a lifesaver!

Stephen crouches beside the counter as the immense METHUSELAH HUMBERFOLD enters the saloon.

METHUSELAH

(Sauntering up to the counter.) Miss, would you have happened to see a vagabond, about yav high, with a hat o' wide brim and a scraggly little beard on his chin, a mustache to boot?

MARIA

No, I don't think I very much have.

METHUSELAH

Really? Well I've got intelligence what tells me that a certain bandit by the name of Stephen Angler has been loiterin' 'round these parts for quite some time now, and I figured might be good a time as any to truly investigate 'em.

PABLO

Oh no sir, he has never been here sir.

METHUSELAH

What's your name?

PABLO

Pablo Mendoza sir, I live in this town.

METHUSELAH

Pablo, with all due respect, you seem a tad eager to interrupt my conversation with this fine young lady to protect this horrible hornswoggler. You sure he's never been here?

PABLO

Uh... yes sir, I am completely sure, yes.

METHUSELAH

Does this feller cause any problems for you? I can easily fix 'em for ya. *(He lifts up his coat, revealing his very large pistol in its belt holster.)* I believe the implication should be mighty obvious.

MARIA

Sir, I barely even know who you are and you come in here threatening violence on my customers.

METHUSELAH

Ah yes, where are my manners! The name's Methuselah Humberfold, I'm a Texas Ranger and I'm here to catch 'n kill the petty bandito known as Ol' Geometry. He made off lickity split with a bag full'a hundred dollar bills from the bank out at El Paso.

JEFFERSON

Sorry to interrupt my good sir, but did you just say Stephen Angler made off with cash from the bank in El Paso?

METHUSELAH

Yessiree. May I ask why you're so interested?

JEFFERSON

Oh, I'm a banker 'round here myself, was just wantin' to hear what's been goin' on with banks near and far.

METHUSELAH

Well, you'd do well to keep this Geometry character well 'n clear of your bank, sir. He'll take off with all your cash in a heartbeat, that scoundrel.

JEFFERSON

Well, there must be a mighty big reward for turnin' the devil in, eh?

METHUSELAH

Oh yes, there rightly is. A thousand dollars for the mathematical magician himself, dead or alive!

MARIA

Thank you very much for letting us know, sir. Is there anything I can help you with, do you need a drink or anything?

METHUSELAH

No thanks ma'am. I gotta go feed my horse anywho, thanks for the greeting friends. *(He exits.)*

Stephen comes out from hiding next to the counter, a fearful look on his face.

STEPHEN

It ain't lookin' good for me, Pablo!

PABLO

No sir, it ain't! What are you thinkin' of doin'?

STEPHEN

Is the man gone?

PABLO

(Quickly steps over to the window and mimes peeking out to see him.) No Mr. Angler, Methuselah is right outside, with his horse.

STEPHEN

What's he doin'?

PABLO

He's uh... Just brushin' her mane and keepin' her watered.

STEPHEN

Thanks be to God! He buys me some more time! Lady Maria, is there anywhere I could hide better than beside your counter?

MARIA

Truthfully, no... *(She looks around for something to be of help.)* Ah, what about this? *(She holds out a bandana.)*

STEPHEN

What's a piece of cloth gonna do for me?

MARIA

Take off your hat and put the bandana on the lower half of your face, it's a disguise!

STEPHEN

Miss, you're incredible! *(He nabs the bandana and ties it up on the lower half of his face.)* How do I look?

MARIA

Just uh, keep a low profile. I can't promise I'll be of much help once he finds out who you are, gotta keep my business safe and all!

Stephen flashes two thumbs up at Maria and goes to sit down at one of the tables.

JEFFERSON

Hah! You really think that flimsy cover will fool Methuselah?

PABLO

Quiet down, Mr. Oakfield! He might hear ya from outside!

JEFFERSON

I don't give a damn!

STEPHEN

(Side eyes Jefferson.) You're out for me too, aren't you? That's why you asked the blasted devil if there was a reward out for my head, wasn't it?

JEFFERSON

Well, Stevie, you and I have always had a bit of a friendly rivalry.

STEPHEN

A friendly rivalry is not grounds for gettin' a poor man killed!

JEFFERSON

You sure as hell don't sound like a poor man with all that clinkin' silver and gold you took from that bank in El Paso!

STEPHEN

Jeffy. I know just the right angle to make that hat of yours get pinned to that wall behind you. I could very easily just subtract a few degrees, if you're pickin' up what I'm puttin' down.

JEFFERSON

Y-you would kill me?

STEPHEN

Not right now, by any stretch, not with that terrible man outside with his gun the size of mount Olympus! He'd hear, y'see.

MARIA

And you ain't damagin' my fine establishment's walls either!

STEPHEN

That too.

MARIA

What's got you so afraid of this guy anyway, Mr. Angler? It's not every day I see you cowering out of view and putting on disguises.

STEPHEN

You've seen him and how he talks, how he postures himself! The man is a cold-blooded killer, a wall of pure muscle, his skin may as well be iron and his gut made of even sterner stuff! He's got the biggest gun in all of Texas, and the sharpest bullets this side of anywhere!

MARIA

But you're the genius Ol' Geometry! The scallywag of El Paso, the math wizard of Texarkana, the sharpshooter of Lawton!

STEPHEN

And none of those things make me any match for a man of Methuselah's stature and blood lust!

PABLO

Stephen, act natural! The man's comin' back in!

Stephen "acts natural." Methuselah enters with Ofelia Alvarez.

MARIA

Oh Methuselah! I thought you said you were on your wait out?

METHUSELAH

Well y'see, I was, but then this little lady right here came on by and started askin' me what I was up to in town, and I figured it would be a fine time to take a load off and just discuss the dangerous crime.

Ofelia waves to Maria, Jefferson, and Pablo.

MARIA

Ah, Ofelia! What's got you coming around?

OFELIA

I was just very curious when I heard that a Texas Ranger was in town! Me and my papa always want to stay on top of things goin' on.

MARIA

Of course!

OFELIA

And Pablo, how's your crop coming along my good friend?

PABLO

Oh it's uh, it's alright! Nothing of n-note really! (*He is staring at Methuselah nervously.*)

OFELIA

(*Clasps her hands together excitedly.*) How delightful! Papa will be happy to know his fields are doing just swell!

METHUSELAH

(*Gestures to Stephen.*) Who's he? I don't remember seein' anyone stroll on in while I was out there.

PABLO

Oh he's just uh-

JEFFERSON

Methuselah, he's really-

MARIA

He's just a local drunk that loves to hang out here! He was out back usin' the outhouse while you were out front talking to lady Ofelia, mhm!

Pablo nods emphatically while Jefferson appears despondent.

METHUSELAH

Hm... Y'all should really do something about town drunkards, they're never a social good.

MARIA

We will, uh, take it into consideration!

METHUSELAH

My fine lady, would you like to take a seat for our talk?

OFELIA

Why yes, sir!

Methuselah pulls out a chair for Ofelia to sit in, and he joins her at the table.

OFELIA

My good sir, I was wanting to know if I could be of any assistance to you in your mission!

METHUSELAH

Thank you kindly little lady. As I was sayin' to you outside, I am quite certain that the criminal burglar Stephen Angler resides in this very town.

OFELIA

Oh yes sir, I know Stephen well!

METHUSELAH

(Leans in, interested.) You do?

PABLO

(Inches over to Stephen. Whispering to him so as to not be heard.) Sir, what's the plan?

STEPHEN

(Whispering.) Y'think I can dash on by 'em?

PABLO

Without bein' noticed? Not by a long shot, sir. Anywho, the man takes up the whole damn door.

STEPHEN

Drat, you're right Pablo. I wouldn't want to put fine Ofelia in harm's way either.

As Pablo and Stephen have been talking, Methuselah pantomimes talking while Ofelia listens.

METHUSELAH

-And that right there is the very reason that this rapsclion of yours has gotta go behind bars or six feet underground!

OFELIA

Oh no sir, I simply had no idea! That dashing man made me fall right into his arms, he did! It never passed my mind to think him a... a criminal!

METHUSELAH

No need to fret little lady, your little flirt with the wrong side of the train tracks can be put behind us if you just tell me where the man is.

OFELIA

Well... *(She gets up from the table)* Last time I heard from him, he was moseyin' around this very establishment!

PABLO

(Butting in) Hello miss, is there anything I could do for you, get you any drinks or food or uh...

OFELIA

What? Oh Pablo, you don't work here!

MARIA

(Stepping out from behind the counter) Y-yes he does now, actually! I just hired him today, as a new member of the waitstaff.

OFELIA
The waitstaff?

METHUSELAH
Hmph. Real honest folks y'all got here.

MARIA
Yeah, he cleans tables 'n such! C-come on Pablo, get these fine f-folks somethin' to snack on!

OFELIA
No, it's really okay, I promise, I'm not quite hungry! Papa made us a scrumptious luncheon today. *(She smiles at Methuselah and strides around the saloon. Maria, Pablo, and Stephen look nervous.)* I am quite certain that poor ol' Stevie told me he'd be at the saloon today... *(She leans down to examine Stephen, but he tries his best not to react.)* Say, who is this?

MARIA
Oh, just a wanderin' drunkard, probably came in with the cattle rustlers passing through and just got left here in town!

OFELIA
Alrighty then!

JEFFERSON
(Standing up in anger) Oh for Christ's sake! It's Stephen Angler, right here, in the flesh! You flippin' flapjacks! *(He reaches over and tears the bandana off of Stephen's face, causing an audible reaction in everyone)*

OFELIA
Stevie!

METHUSELAH
Well I'll be damned!

STEPHEN
Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, Jeffie! You wily little snake! *(He jumps to grab Jefferson by the neck)*

METHUSELAH
(Pulling out his great big gun) Calm down now, son, put the banker down.

OFELIA

(*Running over to Stephen*) No, Methuselah! Don't hurt him!

MARIA

¡Ay dios mio Ofelia! Don't put yourself in danger like that!

METHUSELAH

Really? After what I just talked about?

OFELIA

Yes! He may be a criminal, and a bandit, and a thief, and a liar, and a cheat, and a-

STEPHEN

You really don't have to list all that.

OFELIA

But he's *our* criminal!

METHUSELAH

God above, these yokels and their rural sentimentality...

STEPHEN

Sir, you consider yourself an honorable man, yes?

METHUSELAH

I surely do.

STEPHEN

Then would... (*He looks around the room at his friends and the surroundings*) would you give this rascalion the honor of a fair duel?

JEFFERSON

No, come on you can't seriously-

METHUSELAH

Well alrighty then.

JEFFERSON

What? But what about my, uh *the* reward!

METHUSELAH

You will receive your reward after the fair and just duel, as should be expected! This little wimp will get blown to bits anyway, nothing to be worried about.

STEPHEN

(Comically gulps in fear) L-let me some time to confer with my friends and advisors?

METHUSELAH
Of course, of course.

Pablo and Maria get closer to Stephen as Methuselah glances over his gun and taps his foot on the floor impatiently.

PABLO
Are you really sure of this, Stephen?

OFELIA
I don't want you to die!

MARIA
And I don't want you to damage my saloon! *(Pablo and Ofelia glare at her)* Alright, you dying would be unfortunate too.

STEPHEN
Don't you all worry a bit! I realized just how foolish I've been... One cannot keep running down that long road called life, avoiding consequences forever! I should've known that it was gonna catch up with me eventually... And anyway, I knew that here, with all of you, I would be in good hands. Anyway, I've been surveying the room just to make sure.

OFELIA
Surveying the room?

STEPHEN
Yeah, to see what angle I should shoot in to hit 'im right in his gut.

MARIA
You've been doing *what??*

STEPHEN
Sharpshooting is all about mathematics, my friend. Angles, trajectories, wind speeds, thankfully none of that in here; y'all've helped me realize how caught up in fear I've been! And, on top of that, Maria... you have provided me with that fine set of silver platters above the bar over there.
(He subtly gestures with one hand.)

MARIA
You are not about to shoot at my-

METHUSELAH

Alright, y'all done over there? I want to get this over with so I can lock you up or bury you dead.

STEPHEN

Yessirree, I am surely ready now. *(He flashes a double thumbs up and a smile to Ofelia, Pablo, and Maria)*

OFELIA

I can scarcely bring myself to watch! *(She covers her eyes with her hands but then opens the fingers to peek through)*

METHUSELAH

(Points at Pablo) You, Mendoza. Get over here and count us down.

Methuselah and Stephen stand across from each other, hands at the ready to snatch their guns from their holsters. Jefferson, Maria, and Ofelia ready themselves. Pablo steps between them, and begins to count down.

PABLO

Ten... Nine... Eight... Seven... Six... Five... Four... Three... Two... One... Fire!

There is the sound of two guns firing. Stephen quickly jumps out of the way, leaving them both standing. There is the sound of a bullet ricocheting around the room as Methuselah taunts Stephen.

METHUSELAH

Hah! I may not have hit you, but you missed as we-

Methuselah is cut off by Stephen's bullet piercing his back. He drops his gun, standing for a moment, before collapsing to the ground.

PABLO

Well I'll be damned!

JEFFERSON

No, no, no! Th-this is assault on an officer of the law, y-you oughta go to jail for this Stephen!

OFELIA

But it was a fairly declared duel, sir!

JEFFERSON

W-well it's gotta be s-something! Stephen, you are a crook, a scallywag, and a murderer, and I simply will not-

STEPHEN

(Walks up to Jefferson and slaps him) Jeffie, take Mr. Humberfold to the doctor, will you? He has a bullet in him!

JEFFERSON

(Scowling and mumbling under his breath) Sure I will... shooting the damn ranger, who does he think he is, the rat, the dirty little crook, next time oh yeah next time... *(As he talks he walks over to Methuselah, groaning on the floor, and picks up one of his arms)*

STEPHEN

Pablo, go help our very gracious friend over there.

PABLO

Well alright! *(He walks over to Methuselah and helps Jefferson pick him up)* So, how's it going Mr. Oakfield?

The two drag Methuselah, still groaning in pain, offstage.

OFELIA

Oh thank the stars you're safe and well, Stevie! This town would be such a bore without you.

STEPHEN

Well shucks, that means the world to hear.

MARIA

And now that you're not dealin' with a duel, I think it's time for you to pay up for the dented platter and the torn wallpaper from your little stunt!

STEPHEN

Haha, seems as though it is my time to go, ladies! I bid you both adieu.

MARIA

Don't you just walk out of here, Ol' Geometry!

Stephen exits, pursued by Maria and Ofelia.